

The three realms and nine levels

The Buddhist scriptures describe Samsara as consisting of three realms (*khams gsum*) and nine levels (*sa dgu*). The three realms are:

- i. The Desire Realm (comprising the six realms of hell beings, pretas, animals, etc.)
- ii. The Form Realm
- iii. The Formless Realm

The nine levels of the three realms refer to the **Desire Realm**, the four levels of the **Form Realm**, and the four levels of the **Formless Realm**.

Thus, the nine levels are:

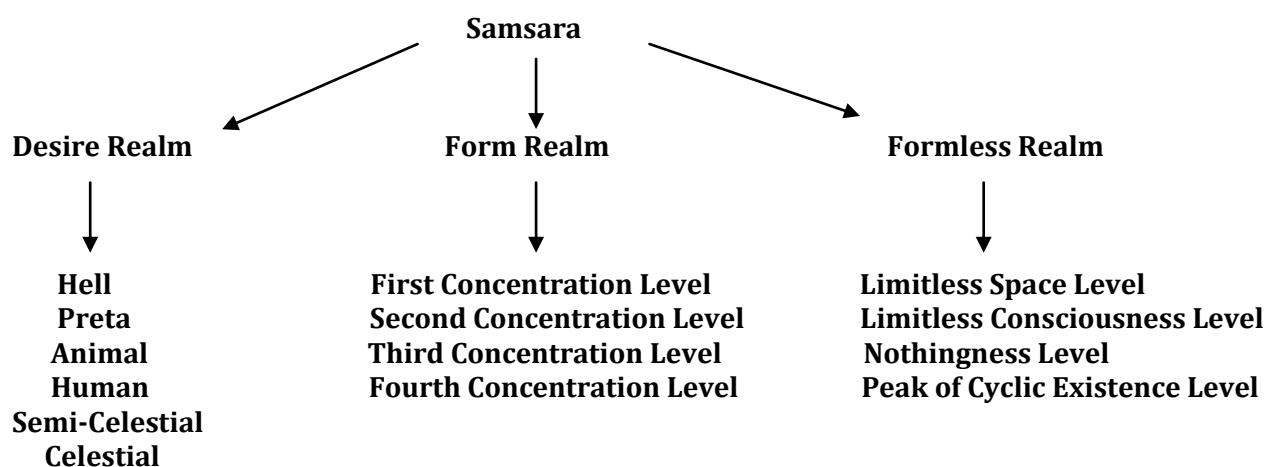
(1) The **Desire Realm**

The four levels of the **Form Realm**:

- (2) The First Concentration Level/Abode
- (3) The Second Concentration Level/Abode
- (4) The Third Concentration Level/Abode
- (5) The Fourth Concentration Level/Abode

The four levels of the **Formless Realm**

- (6) Limitless Space Level/Abode
- (7) Limitless Consciousness Level/Abode
- (8) Nothingness Level/Abode
- (9) Peak of Cyclic Existence Level/Abode



The nine levels are states of existence within Samsara, and on each level different afflictions arise in the mental continua of those born there. The reason for this is that rebirth in one of the eight levels of the Form or Formless Realm is the result of increasingly subtle meditative absorptions, while sentient beings who have not cultivated any meditative absorption are born in the Desire Realm.

In general, there are eight meditative absorptions, with each one corresponding to one of the eight levels of the Form or Formless Realms. These eight meditative absorptions are the product of intense meditation; they are cultivated by both Buddhists and non-Buddhists. So it is important to bear in mind that the following explanation is not unique to the Buddha Dharma but can also be found in non-Buddhist traditions.

The eight meditative absorptions consist of four concentrations and four formless absorptions. The four concentrations are simply known as 'first concentration', 'second concentration', 'third concentration', and 'fourth concentration', whereas the names of the first three formless absorptions describe the principal objects of meditation of these absorptions. The first formless absorption is called 'limitless space', the second 'limitless consciousness', and the third 'nothingness'. The fourth formless absorption is called 'peak of cyclic existence' because (as explained below) its cultivation causes rebirth in the Peak of Cyclic Existence Level, which is the highest level of existence within Samsara. Sometimes the four formless absorptions are also referred to as 'first formless absorption', 'second formless absorption', and so forth.

Each of the four concentrations causes rebirth in one of the four Form Realm Levels and each of the four formless absorptions causes rebirth in one of the four Formless Realm Levels. This means that in order to be reborn in the First Form Realm Level (the First Concentration Level) one must have attained the first concentration, in order to take rebirth in the Second Form Realm Level (the Second Concentration Level) one must have attained the second concentration, and so forth. Likewise, in order to be reborn in the First Formless Realm Level (the Limitless Space Level) one must have attained the first formless absorption, called 'limitless space', in order to be reborn in the Second Formless Realm Level (the Limitless Consciousness Level) one must have attained the second formless absorption, called 'limitless consciousness', and so forth.

Three Realms	Nine Levels	Eight Meditative Absorptions
1. Desire Realm	Desire Level/ Realm	-----
2. Form Realm	First Concentration Level/Abode	First concentration
	Second Concentration Level/Abode	Second concentration
	Third Concentration Level/Abode	Third concentration
	Fourth Concentration Level/Abode	Fourth concentration
3. Formless Realm	Limitless Space Level/Abode	Limitless space absorption/ First formless absorption
	Limitless Consciousness Level/Abode	Limitless consciousness absorption/ Second formless absorption
	Nothingness Level/Abode	Nothingness/ Third formless absorption
	Peak of Cyclic Existence Level/Abode	Peak of cyclic existence/ Fourth formless absorption

Cultivation of the eight meditative absorptions

Of the eight meditative absorptions, it is easiest to attain the first concentration. Each subsequent meditative absorption is increasingly more difficult to attain, which means that cultivation of the fourth formless absorption (peak of cyclic existence) is the most difficult.

Furthermore, the cultivation of the meditative absorptions that are easier to attain must precede the cultivation of the meditative absorptions that are more difficult to attain. Therefore, the cultivation of the second concentration must be preceded by cultivation of the first concentration, the cultivation of the third concentration must be preceded by cultivation of the first and second concentration, the cultivation of the fourth concentration must be preceded by cultivation of the first, second, and third concentration, the cultivation of the first formless absorption (limitless space) must be preceded by cultivation of the four concentrations, and so forth.

Since the first concentration is easiest to attain, meditators intent on cultivating meditative absorptions first set out to cultivate this meditative awareness. The first concentration is an extremely focused state of mind that is also able to engage in very effective analytical meditation. It is preceded by a preparatory stage (*nyer bsdogs*) that is responsible for the attainment of the first concentration. The first moment of the preparatory stage of the first concentration marks the first moment of calm abiding. This means that a meditator who attains the first moment of calm abiding also attains the first moment of the preparatory stage of the first concentration, for that first moment of calm abiding *is* the first moment of the preparatory stage of the first concentration.

In the case of cultivating meditative absorptions in dependence on *mundane* paths, the remaining meditative absorptions are also preceded by their respective preparatory stages.

